

## A Fight for Survival

by Zachary Buchan

“Gasp!” I wake with a start. Today is a big day. Today I take the Intergalactic Explorer Final at my school on mother ship 196A. This determines if I can move on to test habitable earth-like planets for humanity (a pretty important job if you ask me).

I yawn as I put on my school uniform, a tightfitting suit made to withstand the harshest of environments. My bag of clothes, provisions, tools and anything else I will need to survive on an uninhabited planet is on my desktop. I stand there wondering if I should bring the picture of my deceased parents. I decide against it. I exit my dorm, which I share with two other students, who are still asleep. One is studying Intelligent Life Form Diplomacy, the other Space Travel Engineering

I begin my long trek to the launch bay. Along the way I pass the cafeteria, which is serving Nyphla eggs raised by human farmers on planet Nyphor and lab grown toast. As I slow my pace the head cook hollers, “Zenegal can you help me with these boxes.”

“Sure,” I reply. As I pick one box full of plant fertilizer and load it onto a cafeteria hover transporter when I notice I’m going to be late, so I quickly excuse myself from the cafeteria. When I’m back in the hallway I make a beeline for the launch bay.

I am soon arriving at the site where my teacher, General Gerald, and the rest of my class are gathered. There are only five students, including me, because the other five did not pass the midterm on Filigar-398 where we had to take a picture of a carnivorous sentient life form and collect a DNA sample.

“Late again Zenegal,” announces General Gerald in his booming voice.

“S...sorry sir,” I answer squeakily because he’s *really* intimidating.

“Fifty laps around the ship after the test. Assuming you survive that is,” says the general, “Anyways back to the test. Today you will be tested on the skills that you have learned this term. The test will place each of you in a different biome on the test planet. You will each be required to collect as much data as possible. That includes soil samples, plant matter, pictures, DNA samples and live specimens. If you happen to send a live specimen back please also send a form containing its behavior, diet, etc... The more rare and more difficult to obtain the data is, the more points you receive. The three students with the most points will graduate.”

One student puts up her hand, “How do we send data into the administrators?” she asks.

“I will answer your question shortly,” answers the general. “So, moving on, as you know your goal is to collect data but you will also need to arrive at a base in your biome within two days. Its location will be marked on your map. Along the way to the base there will be checkpoints where you can send in data and show that you are not dead. Any questions?”

No one raises their hand.

“Good, the test starts now!” General Gerald hollers at the top of his lungs.

All five of us take off as fast as lightning. We head towards the launch bay where we scoop up the survival packs waiting for us. As I pick up the green pack, I see a note attached to it. The note says, “enter the pod which corresponds with this backpack’s colour” I quickly change direction and head for the green landing pod but Dakota, a big burly dude with olive coloured skin, body checks me and sends me flying into a wall. He takes my pack and drops his own. General Gerald had his head turned and saw nothing. I get up, my ribs aching. I curse at my bad luck. I pick up the gray backpack Dakota left behind and jog to the gray landing pod. I haul myself in and flick the on switch and place the note from the pack, which holds coordinates to where I will land. I sit in the chair in the center of the pod and begin wondering why Dakota would have stolen my pack. Maybe each colour represents a biome. If so, the green would have been forest or jungle, which are usually abundant with life. Then maybe gray is mountains. I sigh but this is no time to be feeling sorry for myself. I need to pass. I need to follow in the footsteps of my parents.

I open my pack. Inside I find rock climber’s gear, ropes, rations, bottles of water, a compass and a map. I examine the map. It shows my landing location, which is in a valley between mountains. I would have to travel north to get to the base. At twenty kilometer intervals the two checkpoints were marked. In my way there was a sparse forest and a stream but the biggest challenge would be the huge mountain in my path.

“Thunk” my pod hit the ground and I scramble to collect my supplies and exit the pod. I have so many questions. I look at my compass and locate north. The sun is still high in the sky so I have about six hours of daylight left. My boots have metal studs on the bottom so getting grip in the rocky soil is easy. I begin my long journey. Then I remember that collecting data is the whole point of this test. I open a canister and fill it with soil and I label it “top soil from mountain region.” I see a lonely stunted tree on the horizon. I trudge on towards that tree.

When I arrive I see a flash of fur go up the spindly branches. I quickly take out my camera, crouch and slowly make my way towards the tree. The thing is on top of a branch just higher than my head. I take a picture before it can run away and then I just stare in awe. I’ve never seen any alien like this before. This animal has a small head with blotched black and brown fur but the most surprising part is the flaps of skin around its neck. They droop three centimeters past its legs and are as long as its fluffy tail. The creature’s body is five centimeters long. It scampers from branch to branch on its nimble paws and I follow it to a gaping hole in a tree trunk. Inside is a collection of needles from the tree and fur. When I look inside I see four bundles of black and brown fur. I assume these are the creature’s babies. Excitedly I take a photo and I snatch a collection of needles and fur and put them in a sample bag labeling them ‘small creature hair and needles’. The mother creature I was following sees me close to its babies and the flaps on the sides of its neck shoot out into a brightly coloured frill, it scares me and I run away.

I continue on my way until the sun begins to set behind the mountain. I decide to not to stop yet because I haven't made it to the first check point and I would like to send in the first of my samples tonight. I pull out my solar-powered flashlight and trek until I see a large satellite dish in the distance, which I assume to be the first checkpoint. It takes me twenty-five minutes to hike there but I arrive just before pitch darkness settles. I pitch my tent and fall into a deep dreamless sleep.

When I awake, I search my pack for my breakfast rations but they are not there! I tear apart my temporary camp but they are nowhere to be found. In their place are many tiny paw prints leading south so I decide not to follow. Instead, I march gloomily with an empty stomach towards the sparse forest. As I enter the forest I nearly collapse of hungry and exhaustion. There is a muddy path leading through the forest. In the mud ahead, I see large reptilian footprints. I take a picture of the footprint and examine it more closely. It scares me but this is exactly what I need to find to pass the test. I keep walking with a little more hope than before. Suddenly, I trip over a rock and fall face first in a footprint in the mud. As I recover, I notice there is something stuck to my face. I peel it off. It is a patch of scales. I quickly store it in my backpack but I freeze when I hear twigs breaking in the bushes beside me. Then a blood-curdling roar rattles my skull. I take off running as fast as my legs can carry me. I can hear the beast pounding the ground with its heavy feet behind me, which encourages me to run faster. I feel myself tiring quickly and the beast begins to gain on me. Suddenly it pounces and its front feet slam into my back sending me sprawling into the

mud. I turn myself over and see the beast's terrifying face. Its scales are a muddy green and his long tail drags behind it like a snake. Its red eyes bore into me and I can see its monstrous jaws salivating. My hands move by themselves, taking out my camera and turning on the flash. I take a picture and the bright flash momentarily blinds it. It roars in pain and confusion clawing at its eyes. I reach for a fist-sized stone that lies in the mud. I heave the stone at the monster's head. Immediately its eyes roll back in its head and it collapses, unconscious.

I fall to the ground scared, hungry, and tired. I'm ready to give up and then I hear my mother's last words in my head. "Never give up. Pursue your dreams. You can do anything you put your mind to." She said that just before my dad and her left on a mission they would never come back from. "I can do this," I think to myself. I struggle to my feet and grasp a branch that has fallen from its tree. I use it as a walking stick. I collect leaves, grass and rocks. I climb over the mountain, which takes me four long hours. When I reach the summit I see the base in the distance. The sun has almost set. I need to get there fast. With my spirit rejuvenated I continue down the opposite slope, towards the base, at a break-neck pace.

"Slam!" I trip on a loose rock and it sends me flying down the incline. I tumble and roll. On the last bump I hear a sickening crunch and I cringe in pain. I think one of my ribs is broken. I realize there is only 45 meters to the base I drag myself up and stumble along. It hurts so much. It feels like my blood is boiling. I see a marked etched black and white. As soon as I make it across medics come racing out of doors in the base to assist me. I black out.

When I open my eyes I'm in a white room in a bed with railings and I have many wires attached to me. A nurse walks in and says, " I see you're awake. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hit by this mother ship at light speed," I reply.

The nurse laughs and says, "You should be out tomorrow in time for the graduation ceremony"

"Thank you"

"You're very welcome."

The next morning I am out of the hospital bed and hobbling back to my dorm to put on formal clothes for the ceremony. I slip on black dress pants, a plaid shirt and blue tie. Because I am slow in my crutches. I take a hover bus to the ceremony building. I get to my seat just in time to hear the announcements.

"First place with 120 points," booms General Gerald "is Dakota because of this beautiful photo along with a DNA sample." A hologram blooms in the center of the room. It shows a black jungle cat with tentacles and a venomous barb at the end of its tail. It looked like it was sleeping. A young man with glasses and a lab coat runs up to the General and whispers something in his ear.

The General clears his throat and speaks to the whole amphitheater, " I have been informed that, according to the DNA sample, this animal was drugged," he looks pointedly at Dakota, " and died after the incident. Therefore Dakota is eliminated and can never apply for the position of Intergalactic Explorer."

Dakota's smug expression turned to one of shame.

"And now the winner with 115 points is... Zenegal!"

My colleagues cheer so loud my skull rattle. Dakota is not liked in my class because he bullies everyone.

"Second and third goes to Emma and Jacob!" this time I cheer too. Emma and Jacob look mystified and elated.

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That night I lay in my bed thinking about what a blast I had at the party even though it was a little sad because one of my friends would have to retake the test next year. I also think about how proud my parents would have been. While holding that happy thought in my head, I fade into sleep.